

Zhang Yimou's *Not One Less* and Rahul Roy's *When Four Friends Meet*

## Teaching 20th Century China and India: Integrating Films and Texts

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For an interdisciplinary course on India and China in the modern world, I advocate using “islands of context.” The scale and complexity of the 20<sup>th</sup> century encounter with imperialism, independence, economic development and then integration in the capitalist world-economy swamps most boats, especially under Colorado College’s intensive block plan. So I ask students to look closely at a few selected issues, to interrogate the evidence, to read critically and, for the dozen films we watch, to view them actively and with discernment. Films play a crucial role in presenting details and texture that allow students to visualize and empathize with lived-experience so different from their own, and they often offer counterpoint to or contradict aspects of our readings. The juxtaposition of the films and the readings provides the fodder for the specific issues—those “islands of context”—that students select for their essays.

Accessible, engaging surveys—I recommend Timothy Cheek’s *Living with Reform: China since 1989* and Edward Luce’s *In Spite of the Gods: The Strange Rise of Modern India*—provide much useful context for the pairing of films and more focused, shorter readings. Students are asked to post four four-page essays that integrate analytic elements from these readings with specific images, incidents, or emotions from films on our course’s on-line web-based “virtual learning environment” (using Moodle), to read their peers’ essays and to post a speci-

fied number of responses. The objective is to create a dialogue, for example, on the gendered dynamics of family life and rural social change in the early 1980s, using Carma Hinton’s film *Small Happiness* (village dynamics on the North China plain) with feminist appraisals of the China’s revolution and subsequent reforms.

Two films, discussed below, are generally successful in helping students to develop empathy and emotional engagement with individuals who populate our “islands of context.” The juxtaposition of these films and the readings encourages an active imagination that asks how the analyses or narratives intersect and how we should be critically interrogating both sets of materials.

### *Not One Less* (1999)

Director Zhang Yimou is best known in the US for a succession of internationally acclaimed films—*Red Sorghum* (1987), *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991), *Hero* (2002), *House of Flying Daggers* (2004), *Curse of the Golden Flower* (2006)—that are familiar to many students. Unlike his recent big-budget blockbusters, in his small 1999 film, *Not One Less* (*Yi ge dou bu neng*

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*shao*) he used non-professional actors to achieve the naturalism of cinema vérité; few students know this film, despite its winning the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival (the first Asian film to win since Kurosawa’s *Rashomon* in 1951; won again last year by Jia Zhangke’s *Still Life*).

Ostensibly about a woefully unprepared, thirteen year-old substitute teacher (Wei Minzhi) in a remote, impoverished rural school, and her dogged determination to recover a ten year-old boy (Zhang Huike) who’s run off to the city (Jiangjiakou in Anhui), the film provides much food for thought about the gap between the town and countryside in contemporary China. Its portrait of the stark rural living standards, with bare-bone village schools and families

vulnerable to sickness and debt, sharply contrasts with the bustling modernity in the impersonal city. But what makes the film’s imagery so effective is its sense of unvarnished authenticity and (carefully calculated) pathos. Wei Minzhi’s tearful televised plea that leads to



Scene from *Not One Less*

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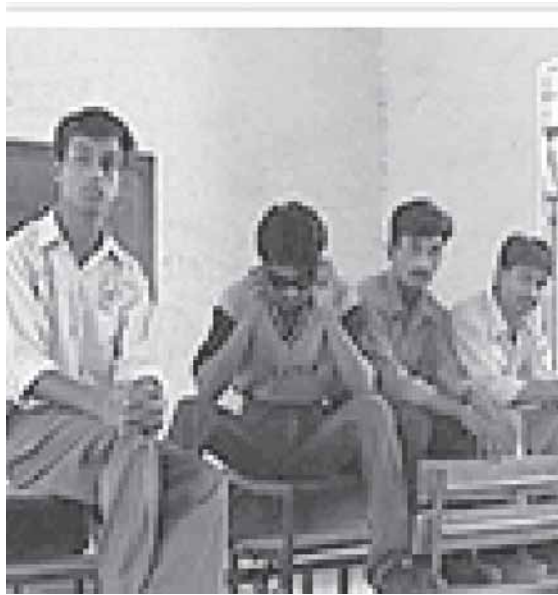
a reunion with her student rarely leaves a dry eye in the classroom. My students care about these characters, and this emotional investment is often evident in their engagement with and analysis of the assigned academic literature.

Zhang Huike puts a face on the massive migration of 100 million-plus from the countryside. To get students to think critically about the social experience of this migration, and the market reforms that drive it, I assign Lei Guang's detailed portrait of a migrant worker, and then small contractor, in the urban home improvement market. Lei's thick description of one migrant's trajectory from Anhui to the outskirts of Beijing, and the succession of his strategies to grasp the brass ring of hard-scrabble success, well illustrates the complex of interaction of family ties, short-lived social alliances and shifting state regulations that construct the entrepreneurial terrain. Lei's principal concern is to convey the market as a lived experience, a messy social process full of misrepresentations and unequal power relations, and to show how individuals respond to changing conditions. The depth of detail in Lei's analysis helps the students imagine the migrants as active agents, not simply passive victims, negotiating the terrains of the new urban China, and the markets of those environments as rooted in particular political and social contexts, markets with actually-existing people in them.

#### **When Four Friends Meet (2000)**

Rahul Roy's 43-minute documentary *When Four Friends Meet* (2000) [available at [www.metaphormedia.org](http://www.metaphormedia.org)] follows four male high school dropouts (Bunty, Kamal, Sanjay, Sanju) in a trans-Jumana housing colony on the outskirts of Delhi. The film, (supported by UNICEF) was part of a series on South Asian male attitudes toward sex roles and sexuality. The lads who are portrayed, are roughly the same age as my traditional college students, but with very different life chances, expectations and knowledge bases. This contrast has often sparked sharp and occasionally insightful responses from my students.

Roy's film intersperses the jocular camaraderie among the boys with individual profiles; the portraits are often plaintive and attitudes exhibited toward women often disturbing. These young men have checkered work experience, largely



Scene from *When Four Friends Meet*

in the informal sector, few prospects and no clear path to prosperity. Yet they dream of striking it rich and, in the terms of my students, "getting lucky." But their romantic prospects are slight, constrained by social mores and short money. Several of these young men opposed the idea of any wife of theirs ever working (unless they had "good" professional jobs), an attitude more typical several pay-grades above their station. And they spoke shamelessly about harassing young women should they get the chance. Students tend to find these attitudes provocative and pathetic in equal measure.

One of the most striking aspects of the film is the way that these men employed Hindi films, both story-lines and songs, as templates for making sense of life and for suggesting appropriate roles and behaviors toward the opposite sex. Women, in urban India, are all around them in the public space, yet our lads socialize only among themselves, often "piled haphazardly on top of each other," as a student wrote, "singing and nodding along to the [Bollywood song track]... the closest thing to a religion for these men caught in transition, assertive, slanted and solid as air." Life imitates art, without ever winning the girl.

I assign two chapters from Pankaj Mishra's recent *Temptations of the West*, that focus on college life in Benares in the mid-1980s and an election in Allahabad in 2000. Mishra's portrait of an unraveling educational institution (Benares Hindu University) plagued by corruption and violence takes the gloss off the academic track that Bunty and his buddies

abandoned. The downward mobility of upper-caste educated youth raises lots of questions about what it takes to succeed and how individual trajectories reflect the effects of institutional structures. The callow political culture of the 2000 election, and complex calculus of communities and parties, serves as a sobering reminder to my students of the messy dynamics of democratic politics. These chapters caution against those who invoke common talismans of education or democracy as keys to individual or collective mobility.

This film and these readings don't have an exact correspondence. But I find the pairing helpful in addressing a larger issue of what modernity means. Many of my students harbor a general expectation that the recent economic reforms will make India and China "just like us." Markets will fuel growth, so this reasoning goes, and social attitudes will conform to contemporary standards of the West. Mishra, writing in *The Guardian* newspaper [<http://www.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,,1794329,00.html>], sought to disabuse readers of this notion. He observed "... the hope that fuels the pursuit of endless economic growth - that billions of customers in India and China will one day enjoy the lifestyles of Europeans and Americans - is an absurd and dangerous fantasy. It condemns the global environment to early destruction, and looks set to create reservoirs of nihilistic rage and disappointment among hundreds of millions of have-nots." To imagine the lived-experience of Bunty and the boys, and entertain why they might hold the attitudes they express, helps my students discern the contradictory consequences of modern social change.

#### **Citations**

- Lei Guang. 2005. "The Market as Social Convention: Rural Migrants and the Making of China's Home Renovation Market." *Critical Asian Studies* 37(3): 391-412.
- Mishra, Pankaj. 2006. "Benares" and "Allahabad" in *Temptations of the West*. Pp. 3-21, 25-79. NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.